

THE TERCENTENARY

OF THE

HEROIC VOW

OF 21 NOVEMBER, 1691 (1/2)

A man in a state of «great perplexity»

During the summer of 1691, Blain tells us (1), Monsieur de La Salle found himself in a state of "great perplexity". On the one hand, he had every reason to be proud of the work that had been accomplished in twelve years –ten Christian and free schools under the direction of his Brothers; on the other hand, he saw that, for some time now, difficulties and obstacles of all kinds were piling up.

When, in February 1688, he had come to Paris with two Brothers in response to the request of M. de La Barmondière, parish priest of Saint Sulpice, to take up residence there in the Rue Princesse and assume responsibility for the parish school, he had left behind in Reims a flourishing community, a postulancy and a training college for masters from rural districts. But in the absence of the Founder the situation had deteriorated at Reims: the community had lost half of its members (8 Brothers out of 16), the college had to close and the postulancy was almost empty (the Founder had transferred this to Paris, but to no avail –the last young subjects had left and had not been replaced).

In the capital itself the situation was far from reassuring. True, the success of the Rue Princesse school had led the new parish priest of Saint-Sulpice (M. Baudrand) to entrust a second school to the Brothers, this one in the Rue du Bac. But this had provoked the wrath of the writing masters who took M. de La Salle to court, and even though they lost their case, they did not lay down their arms: further attacks were only too clearly to be expected from them. The parish priest himself had wanted to modify the habit worn by the Brothers, a presumption on his part that threatened the interior liberty of the community. The Superior had replied with his "*Memoire on the Habit*" which was, more than anything else, a defence of the specific nature and autonomy of the Institute.

Added to these worries from outside, the Founder had serious reason to be concerned about his health. A first sign of this occurred in December 1690 on the occasion of a journey to Reims. A relapse followed in 1691, and this time his life was endangered; it needed the energetic and painful intervention of Dr. Helvetius to fend off the threat. Meanwhile another terrible trial had befallen him: Brother Henri L'Heureux, whom he had brought to Paris to prepare him to take over as Superior, had died after only a short illness.

Several other Brothers had also fallen ill, while two of the four members of the Paris community quit in a fit of discouragement.

In a word, the "perplexity" spoken of by Blain well expressed a personal crisis for La Salle, a crisis of doubt and disarray: *«after so many sacrifices, so much labour and trouble, after so many crosses and persecutions, he was back where he had been ten years earlier, with only a handful of Brothers. His undertaking had not made much progress and he had reason to fear that it would eventually die out.»* (2)

Growth from within.

If John Baptist de La Salle did experience discouragement, it was of short duration. He recovered his confidence in prayer and reflection and decided to bolster his Institute from within. There could be no move forward as yet, no new foundations, for there was need to strengthen wills, and strengthen bodies too, and so lay firm foundations for the future. This would be done in four stages:

- a new house would be rented, outside of Paris;
- all the Brothers would be given the opportunity to make a spiritual retreat;
- two of the Brothers would be bound to himself in a special and permanent form of association – "the heroic vow";
- a novitiate would be opened to guarantee the future of the work.

Vaugirard

It was in August 1691 that La Salle found the new residence he was looking for; he rented a house at Vaugirard, a property with spacious garden. At that time Vaugirard was only a simple village situated on the route to Issy, south-west of Paris and about 2 km. from the gates of the capital. The village was a quiet, wooded spot, a pleasant meeting-place for the people of Paris who gathered there in the numerous inns. Today Vaugirard has become part of the capital itself and forms part of the 15th arrondissement.

The property rented by the Founder was at the entrance to the village, coming from Paris. It was about 3 km. from the Rue Princesse and 1 from the parish church, Saint Lambert's. (The present St. Lambert's is a more recent foundation and is a little nearer to the property concerned which, incidentally no longer exists, although historians have situated it in the rectangle formed by the Rues Blumet, Copreau and Vaugirard.

The house stood alone and was in poor condition, but the air was good. Blain describes it in terms of its most wretched aspects and allowance must perhaps be made for exaggeration on his part: broken windows, shutters coming apart, windows letting in rain and snow, furniture almost non-existent, absence of any heating...

At the beginning there was no chapel and for Mass, the Brothers and novices went to a private chapel nearby. In 1697, when this chapel was closed by order of the Archbishop (who was against the current tendency of private chapels to proliferate) the prelate granted the Founder authorisation to have one in the Brothers' residence.

Before coming to the subject of the "heroic vow" it may be of interest to note that, fifty years previously, in December

1641, three disciples of Père Condren, namely Jean-Jacques Olier, François de Caulet and Jean du Ferrier, had likewise betaken themselves to Vaugirard to pray and meditate there before laying the foundations of the future Society of Saint Sulpice. Was La Salle thinking about this episode when he chose Vaugirard; or was he simply influenced by the solitude and salubrity of the place, as well as its proximity to Paris, not to mention the moderate figure requested for the rent?

The vow of 21st November 1691

Blain is the only one of the first biographers of the Founder to speak about the vow of 21st November 1691. The probable explanation for this is that only the three persons involved were aware of what happened and it was one of them, Gabriel Drolin no doubt, who gave the information to Blain (3)

In his account the biographer places the heroic vow prior to the acquisition of the Vaugirard house, but in so doing he is in contradiction to other facts related by him. Thus, he provides a detailed account of the first retreat of the Brothers at Vaugirard, held in September 1691 (the period of the school vacation). Then he speaks of the "novitiate" (it was a prolonged retreat) as having begun on 8th October of the same year – a session attended by a certain number of Brothers whose places were presumably taken in the schools by teachers trained in the establishment at Reims. All of which shows very well that the house had been rented well before 21st November 1691, the date at which Blain places the "heroic vow". It seems logical therefore to situate the vow at Vaugirard, as all subsequent biographers have done.

Why 21st November?

The Presentation of the Blessed Virgin in the Temple is celebrated on 21st November and this was the date chosen for the renewal of vows by the Sulpicians, the Sisters of Father Barré, the Brothers of the Christian Union, the Congregation of Saint Louis, the French Carmelites and others. It is known also that this feast was celebrated with solemnity in the Sulpician seminaries and this had left a deep impression on the mind of John Baptist de La Salle when he was a seminarian there. No doubt these reasons had something to do with the choice of the day for the major engagement we are speaking about. Perhaps also there were particular circumstances that favoured this date. Thus, the 21st November fell on a Wednesday in 1691, and according to the 1705 text of the Rule, which was probably already in use, when this occurred, holiday was given on the Wednesday instead of the normal Thursday. We know also that on the previous day, the 20th, La Salle had made a visit to the notaries in Paris concerning the bequest of his grandmother, Perrette Lespagnol, recently deceased (4). This would have provided an opportunity for him to confer with the two Brothers concern-

ned, whom obviously he would have previously contacted about the matter. Their visit to Vaugirard would pass unnoticed since all the Paris Brothers used to go there on free days. No doubt the ceremony took place in the chapel neighbouring the Brothers' house and so the latter, apart, of course, from the two concerned, knew nothing of it.

The two disciples concerned

The Founder, then, chose two disciples to undertake this commitment with him: Brother Nicholas Vuyart and Brother Gabriel Drolin.

The place and date of Nicolas Vuyart's (or Wiart's) birth are not known, but he must have entered the Institute at Reims in 1681 since we find him in charge of the school at Rethel from 1682. Some biographers think that he was principal of the teacher-training establishment at Reims in 1688, when the Founder left for Paris. However that may be, he was of the Rue du Bac school from its opening in 1690, and it is reasonable to suppose that he became the Director of the Rue Princesse community after the death of Henri L'Heureux in 1691. Later on, in 1699, when La Salle, helped by the parish priest of Saint-Hippolyte in Paris, founded a second college for teachers, it was to Vuyart that he entrusted the direction of the undertaking, showing thereby his recognition of the Brother's great pedagogical talents. As we know, the enterprise turned out badly both for the college and for Nicolas himself.

Gabriel Drolin was born at Reims (in the parish of Saint James) on 22nd July, 1664. He entered the Institute in 1684, having previously done classical studies and gone as far as receiving the tonsure. In 1685 he was sent to Laon where, the following year, he fell ill. In 1691 he must have been a member of the Rue Princesse community and was perhaps in charge of the school situated in the same place. We know that he had become the first director of the school at Calais in 1700, before being entrusted, two years later, with the arduous mission of establishing the young Institute in Rome.

We may wonder why La Salle chose these two Brothers to pronounce with him the "heroic vow" of 21st November 1691. No doubt it was because they were then the two senior members of the Institute, but also probably because of their personal and professional qualities. Anyway, they both entered into his purpose and all three pronounced the formula which we are now to read.

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- (1) Blain 1, 312.
 (2) Ibid.
 (3) Blain. 1, 313-314
 (4) Aroz. CL 26, 146.